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THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

THE GENESIS OF THE CHRISTIAN MINISTRY¹

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This volume is a characteristic product of staid British scholarship. It is composed of six essays written by Anglican divines representing the universities of Cambridge, Oxford, and Dublin, and is edited by the late Professor Swete of Cambridge. In point of time the studies cover the ante-Nicene period of church history. The topics treated are "Conceptions of the Church in Early Times" by Arthur James Mason, "The Christian Ministry in the Apostolic and Sub-Apostolic Periods" by Joseph Armitage Robinson, "Apostolic Succession" by Cuthbert Hamilton Turner, "The Cyprianic Doctrine of the Ministry" by John Henry Bernard, "Early Forms of Ordination" by Walter Howard Frere, and "Terms of Communion and the Ministration of the Sacraments in Early Times" by Frank Edward Brightman. A series of elaborate indexes complete the volume.

The editor explains that the essays have been written at the request of Canon Wilson, of Worcester, who asked for a fresh examination of the questions which gather around the origin and early development of the Episcopacy, and the nature and degree of the sanction which it possesses. Stated in his own words the question raised by Canon Wilson was "Whether history shows that the Episcopal churches, Greek, Roman, Anglican, and others, are so exclusively the branches of the Catholic church that they are debarred by fundamental principles from recognizing the non-Episcopal bodies as true

branches of the one Catholic church; whether men are right in saying, what is sometimes stated, that we alone have a divinely commissioned fellowship, and that others have their ministry and their sacraments from below, that is, from human appointment." A distinctly polemical interest might be expected to dominate contributors writing with this specific problem in mind. These essays, however, are not apologetic in form. On the contrary, their aim is simply to lay before the reader the historic data as furnished by all the extant sources of information. To be sure, it is evident that the writers sometimes favor interpretations which ascribe sacramental functions and powers to the church when to a student with different ecclesiastical connections the evidences of sacramentalism might seem less obvious. But generally speaking, the historical materials are exhibited in a fairly objective manner.

What then does history prove? Does it show that the ministry of the Episcopal churches has been decreed from heaven, while that of the non-Episcopal churches exists merely by human appointment? Unquestionably history makes clear that Christians at a comparatively early date *regarded* their community and its ministry as a divine institution. To this fact, already generally recognized among historians, the essays add nothing essentially new, and they interpret the familiar data in hand along lines previously laid down by Lightfoot in his

¹ *Essays on the Early History of the Church and the Ministry.* Edited by H. B. Swete. New York: Macmillan, 1918. Pp. xx+446. \$4.00.

well-known essay on "The Christian Ministry." True to their Anglican heritage, the authors—or at least those who deal with this particular phase of the discussion—regard the early Christian ministry as consciously official from the start, rather than at first a functional activity of charismatic or prophetic character, subsequently taking on a more official form.

However, is this point so vital as has sometimes been assumed? It certainly is not impossible, though perhaps not probable, that Christians from the very first regarded their community life as a divinely established institution and its ministry of divine appointment. Yet, even so, is modern religious thinking to be bound by the same opinion? It was the custom in ancient times to regard all social institutions, and particularly those of a religious character, as existing by divine decree. This interpretation of an institution was practically synchronous with the first consciousness of its worth and the desire for its perpetuation. But in modern times, when social activities and organizations are studied genetically, must not a new interpretation of origins, expressed in terms of functional values, displace the *a priori* theory of earlier times? While the essayists, or at least some of them, are obviously aware of this crucial problem, their attitude toward it is professedly non-committal. The editor plainly states that it is not the purpose of the volume to ask whether the Christians of the first days were right or wrong in their opinions regarding the problems under discussion. In fact he predicts that readers who turn to the early history of Christianity for ready-made solutions

of modern problems will find the essays disappointing, while to other readers who attach little weight to the precedents of early Christianity, they may seem irrelevant. Each of these methods of procedure is deprecated. To quote, "The right attitude toward the history of our faith lies between these two extremes, consisting neither in a blind acceptance of all that bears the hallmarks of antiquity nor in the equally fatuous refusal to be guided, where guidance is needed, by ancient precedent." These words, commendably cautious and sincere as they manifestly are, will doubtless seem to some readers to involve a fundamental evasion of the most important question at issue.

To sum up our estimate of these essays, they call forth hearty commendation as a comprehensive array of historical statistics. It would be difficult to find a more succinct and scholarly account of the several topics studied. At the same time the discussion sheds almost no new light upon the subject, nor can it be said to mark any substantial advance of critical historical scholarship in this field. One cannot refrain from regretting that the essayists have so uniformly failed to note any vital connection between the growth of the church as a social institution and its immediate environment at successive stages in its history. A study concerned less with the church's *being* and more with its *becoming* might have furnished, not only much new information regarding this early institution and its ministry, but also some interesting suggestions of how the church today should interpret its mission in the new social order.